

# Hey Doc—I've been bitten by a tick. What do I do now?

Anne Kjemtrup, D.V.M., M.P.V.M., Ph.D., California Department of Public Health

Few insect stings or arthropod bites elicit as visceral a response as tick bites. Late fall in California may herald an increase in tick-bite calls or visits by patients because this is when human-biting ticks in California are most active. These include adult western black-legged ticks (*Ixodes pacificus*), Pacific Coast ticks (*Dermacentor occidentalis*), and American dog ticks (*D. variabilis*). Prompt and correct removal of an embedded tick is important to decrease the possibility of tick-transmitted diseases such as Lyme disease (transmitted by the western black-legged tick) or Rocky Mountain spotted fever (transmitted by *Dermacentor* spp. ticks), and to avoid excessive hypersensitivity or foreign body reactions<sup>1</sup>.

Removing a tick is usually a straightforward procedure that can be taught to patients, particularly if a patient is bitten frequently or cannot readily make an office visit. Medical intervention may be necessary if the tick is embedded in a sensitive or difficult-to-reach area, or if the patient lacks the necessary tools or self-confidence to remove the tick without assistance. Prompt removal is critical to decrease the possibility of disease transmission. Both *Rickettsia rickettsii*, the agent of Rocky-Mountain spotted fever, and *Borrelia burgdorferi*, the agent of Lyme disease, are transmitted by the tick 24 or more hours after attachment<sup>2-4</sup>.

Manual removal of ticks is the best approach and simply requires a pair of blunt medium-tipped forceps<sup>5,6</sup>; curved forceps are particularly helpful. Use gloves to protect from exposure to the tick's fluids if the tick is accidentally punctured. If possible, cleanse the area around the tick with soap and water or antiseptic solution. Using forceps, grasp the tick's mouthparts as close to the skin as possible. Using gentle, continuous traction, pull the tick slowly upwards, perpendicularly away from the skin. Do not twist or jerk the tick while pulling. Occasionally during the removal process, the body of the tick may become separated from the head, leaving the tick's mouthparts embedded in the skin. These should be removed because they can cause local irritating inflammatory reactions<sup>7</sup>. The embedded mouthparts can be removed as one would a splinter<sup>6</sup> or with a small skin punch biopsy<sup>5</sup>.

Once removed, cleanse the bite wound with soap and water. At the medical office, the tick should be disposed of in hazardous waste or, at home, the tick can be disposed of in the trash or flushed in the toilet. If desired, it may be saved for identification by placing it in alcohol. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) does not recommend testing a tick for the purpose of medical decision-making ([www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Documents/TickTestQandA.pdf](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Documents/TickTestQandA.pdf)). The patient should be instructed to monitor for signs of tick-borne disease such as fever, rash, and flu-like symptoms up to 30 days after the tick bite and to seek medical care in such cases. The administration of a single 200 mg dose of doxycycline to prevent Lyme disease after the bite of black-legged ticks has been suggested in highly Lyme-endemic areas in the eastern United States<sup>8</sup>. The prophylactic value of this approach has not been studied following the bites of western black-legged ticks in California where Lyme disease epidemiology differs from the eastern United States ([www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Documents/TBDPhysicianTutorial.pdf](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Documents/TBDPhysicianTutorial.pdf)).

Some commercial tick-removal devices have been shown to be effective at facilitating the removal of ticks<sup>9-11</sup>. These devices principally have beveled slits that are designed to grasp the tick at the mouthparts close to the skin attachment site. Like the forceps procedure, the tick is then slowly and continuously pulled upwards, away from the skin, to remove it. These tools may be useful for patients often exposed to ticks or who find grasping forceps difficult.

Passive tick removal techniques such as: 1) coating the tick's body with nail polish, petroleum jelly, alcohol, or gasoline, 2) lighting the tick with a match, 3) swabbing the tick with liquid soap, or 4) injecting lidocaine at the tick attachment site, are popular lore. These techniques are based on the premise that these noxious stimuli may stop the tick's respiration and will make the tick "back out." These methods are ineffective at best<sup>12,13</sup>, dangerous at worse, and should not be used.

Patients should be reminded about the importance of tick-bite avoidance and of prompt tick removal to avoid

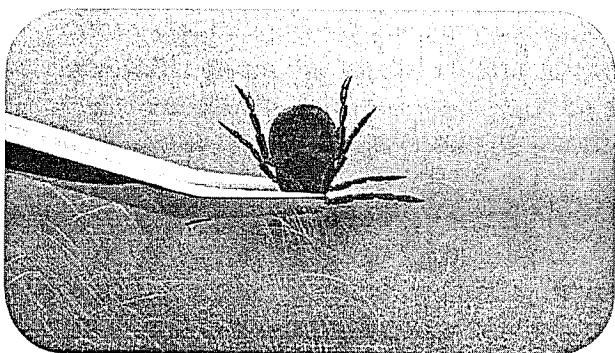
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## Tick bites *(continued from page 10)*

disease transmission from an infected tick. If individuals frequent areas where ticks are found, remind them to:

- Apply a repellent containing DEET on exposed skin.
- Use a spray with permethrin on their clothes to kill ticks.
- Wear light-colored long sleeves and long pants.
- Tuck pants into socks or boots and tuck in shirt.
- Check themselves and their pets for ticks for several days after being in an area where ticks are found.

More information on tick-borne diseases in California can be found at [www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Pages/TickBorneDiseases.aspx](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Pages/TickBorneDiseases.aspx).



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